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CRITICAL RACE PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL LAW SYMPOSIUM

Intersectionality in Europe: a depoliticized concept?

EMILIA ROIG — 6 March, 2018



The reach of intersectionality in Germany has been such that as many disciplinary fields as sociology, cultural studies, ethnology, history, law, philosophy, psychology, migration studies, public policy and of course, gender studies have been touched by it. Whether approached as a theory, heuristic device, method or conceptual tool, intersectionality has been acclaimed as one of the most powerful contributions to feminist scholarship by a number of authors. Numerous feminist scholars are currently working on intersectionality in German universities and the concept has been adopted as a new paradigm in feminist studies, but “[s]imilar to other “traveling theories” [...], intersectionality falls prey to widespread misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement, and disarticulation” (Bilge, 2013: 410).

Debates about differences and hierarchies among women have also taken place in Germany throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Racist oppression and paternalism emanating from white German feminists have been addressed several times, especially with regards to the cooperation of migrant women with white German women in anti-racist and intercultural work (Apostolidou, 1980; Camlikbeli, 1984; Kalpaka and Räthzel, 1985). Some years later, a group of feminist migrant women have elaborated on their overlapping identities and the corresponding structural oppression they face (FeMigra, 1994). Inspired by US Black feminist Audre Lorde, Afro-German women – together with a white German woman – also theorized on the specificity of their Black and female identity (Oguntoye et al., 1986). However, these voices remained largely unheard within mainstream German feminist theory. The fact that hegemonic feminism in Germany has bypassed these debates is symptomatic of the pervasive racial oppression within white feminist circles in the country. Moreover, the recent interest that has been growing among these very circles for the theory of intersectionality, and the way it is developed and approached is also indicative of the problematic interpretation of the theory in Germany. As Umut Erel and her colleagues observe, the German case demonstrates how the concept of ‘race’ can be adopted for purely academic purposes and has served to erase home-grown anti-racist feminist struggles and theoretical debates which go back to the 1980s and 1990s (Erel et al., 2008: 272).

As part of this phenomenon, intersectionality theory has undergone a process of depoliticization on its way to the mainstream feminist movement in Germany.

A conference on the application of intersectionality in the European context was organized by German scholar Helma Lutz and held in Frankfurt earlier that same year. Kimberlé Crenshaw was present at the conference, along with other scholars from Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and Austria working on intersectionality. Both conferences continued the discussion on the use of the category “race” in the European context, where the concept is met with profound reluctance either due to the history of genocide like in Germany, and due to strong traditions of Republicanism like in France – and to a lesser extent the Netherlands. The reasons for the almost categorical rejection of “race” will be discussed at length in a subsequent section (see 2.2). At this point, I would like to analyze the implications of such reluctance for the displacement of intersectionality from the USA to Europe, and more specifically to Germany. This ongoing debate indicates that to this day, no agreement has been reached (Grabham et al., 2009; McCall, 2005). The lack of consensus on the relevance of race in most European countries implies a ‘loss’ and ‘erasure’ in intersectionality theory as it travels from the USA. As Gail Lewis remarkably observed,

“for feminists in some parts of Europe to seemingly uncritically reproduce the position that race is unutterable and without analytic utility in the contemporary European context can be experienced as an act of epistemological and social erasure – erasure both of contemporary realities of intersectional subjects and of the history of racial categories and racializing processes across the whole of Europe” (Lewis, 2013: 880).

This erasure of race also means that the experiences of Black women and other women of color no longer occupy a critical space in discussions on intersectionality. It also gradually erases the origins of the concept. In fact, intersectionality not only traveled from North America to Europe, but also from the *margins* to the *centre*. Arriving in the centre is not without implications, however, for the visibility, subversive nature, and original aims of a concept. The issue of whether the content and integrity of concepts and theories vary after they have traveled also poses the question of the “due recognition and valorization of the sites and subjects of ‘origin’ of the concept or theory” (Lewis, 2013: 871). Lewis adds that

“To cast intersectionality as such a powerful and creative concept, theory, analytic in such terms is perhaps to pay witness to the generative capacity of theory making that comes from the margins, in this case black feminism. It is to acknowledge that black women produce knowledge and that this knowledge can be applied to social and cultural research beyond the social, political, cultural, interpersonal issues and processes that are deemed specific to black and other women of color and become part of a more generalisable theoretical, methodological and conceptual toolkit” (2013, p.871).

If the process of generalization she talks about necessitates a certain level of abstraction, it seems that the German application of intersectionality failed to acknowledge the racialization processes that are so salient in European contexts. It results that intersectionality in the European context primarily revolves around gender, establishing it as main category besides the much preferred and less loaded term “ethnicity,” but also class, ability, etc. Encarnacion Gutierrez-Rodriguez was one of the very few speakers who addressed this issue at the Vienna conference. She reminded that the German-speaking feminist epistemology has long been characterized by the latent exclusion of differences. It is not until the end of the 1980s that race and ethnicity began to emerge as categories, and that gender studies slowly began to be decolonized. Gutierrez-Rodriguez thus suspects that intersectional analyzes take a rhetorical form if domination systems remain

unaddressed. She argues that if the intersectionality discourse implies a complex analysis of power relations, it tends to minimize the relevance and role of racism. Moreover, she contends that struggles over definition power (*definitionsmacht*) in the academia reflect broader societal power struggles, and that academic spaces are in fact embedded in domination structures (Ellmeier, 2009). The fact that the discussions on intersectionality in the German context involve almost exclusively white women is thus not incidental.

Whiteness, here should be untied “from skin color, physiology, or biology, and [understood] as a: structurally advantaged position (race privilege); a (privileged) standpoint from which White people view themselves, others and society; and a set of cultural practices that are considered “unmarked”” (Frankenberg 1993, cited in Bilge, 2013: 412). Sirma Bilge contends that

“[t]he appropriation of a whitened intersectionality needs to be countered by insistently emphasizing intersectionality’s constitutive ties with critical race thinking and (re)claiming a non-negotiable status for race and the racializing processes in intersectional analysis and praxis. Recentering race in intersectionality is vital in the face of widespread practices that decenter race in tune with the hegemonic post racial thinking” (2013: 413).

The gradual erasure of race from intersectionality by European feminist scholars has had far-reaching consequences for the fight for racial justice in Europe. It has classified “intersectionality” as a sub-discipline of gender studies and feminism, leaving out the political claims of racialized women.

Emilia Roig is executive director of the Center for Intersectional Justice (CIJ), an organisation launched in 2017 that seeks to deploy equality laws and antidiscrimination frameworks strategically to combat the multiple sources of systemic discrimination that lead to marginalization and social inequality in Europe.

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